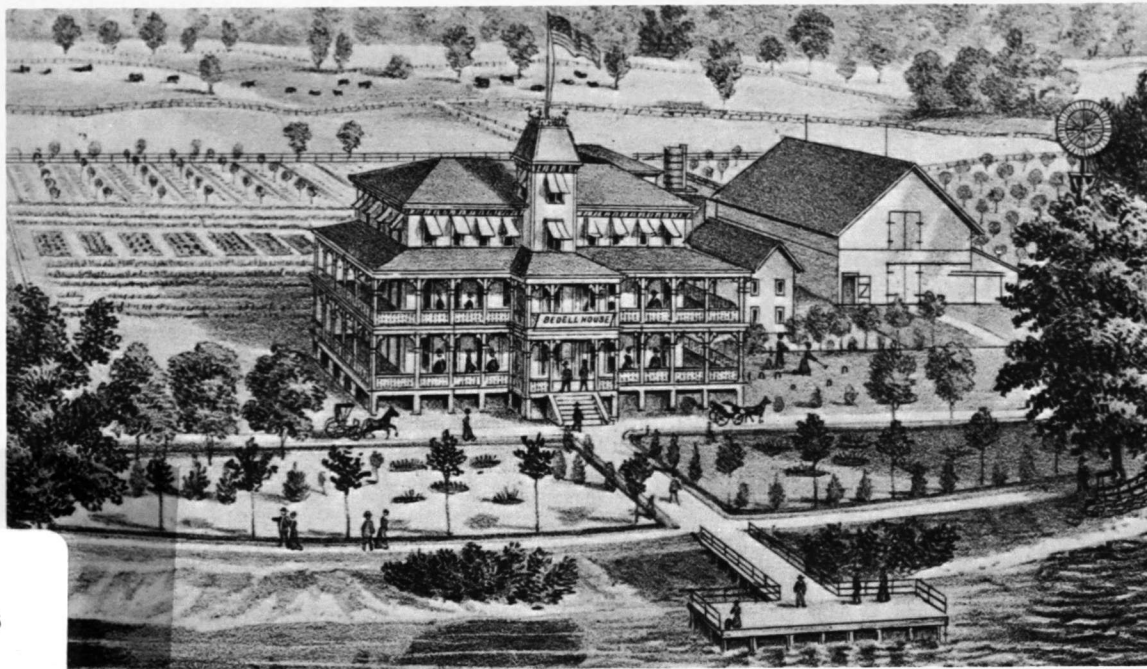


A HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF GRAND ISLAND



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Bedell House Farm.

by Marion E. Klingel

Archeological evidence unearthed within the past decade places early man on Grand Island approximately 4,000 years ago. Research, based on burial site discoveries, has produced findings that point to early campsites dating back to about 3500 B. C. to 1000 B. C., a period of village-dwelling farmers from about 1000 B.C. to 1609 A.D., and then the coming of the white man. Since early inhabitants left no written record, only by evidences and materials

can the unwritten history of the town be reconstructed. Such study is continuing on Grand Island, a race against time as rapid development continues to destroy material vital to the archeologists.

Grand Island was called "Owanun-gah" by the Neuter Indians, "Ga-We-Not" by the Senecas who conquered them, and "LaGrande Isle" by the French who discovered it.

Taken over by the Iroquois when that powerful Nation conquered the Neuters, Grand Island later was

claimed by the French and then, after hard battle, by the British. When the latter were expelled during the Revolutionary War, the Island again reverted to the Senecas.

In 1815, Grand Island was purchased from the Seneca Indians by the State of New York for \$11,000, according to a treaty on file in Albany. Dated September 12, 1815, and signed by Governor Daniel D. Tompkins, Peter B. Porter, Chief Red Jacket, and others, the treaty further provides for the "Chief Sachems and Warriors of the Seneca Nation of Indians equal rights and privileges with the citizens of the United States in hunting, fishing and fowling in and upon the waters of the Niagara River and of encamping on the said Island for that purpose whilst the same shall continue to belong to the people of the State of New York."

Among the first settlers were a group of homesteaders lead by Pendleton Clark. Tired of taxation, they went about setting up their own government with Clark as "Governor." The so-called "squatters" (1817-1819) cleared land, built cabins, and earned what

they could by chopping down Grand Island's towering white oaks and cutting them into barrel staves which ended up in the British West Indies (via Montreal) where they were made into containers for rum and molasses. An early map charts "Governor" Clark's home as being on East River Road just south of what is now Love Road.

Complaints about the tax-free islanders and their timber cutting operations resulted in legislation being passed in Albany in April 1819, ordering the Sheriff of Niagara County to have them removed and their cabins destroyed. Eight months passed before Sheriff James Cronk got around to sending militiamen and officers to carry out the eviction. It took several days to finish the detail.

About 70 of the squatter's buildings were burned and 150 of the vagabonds taken off the Island. Found to be desperately poor, the people were given a choice of being transported either to Canada or the United States. The self-styled Governor Clark purchased land along the Erie Canal and settled in Pendleton. Expenses for the "war" on the Island "Republic" totaled \$578.99!

Defined by law as having an area of 17,381 acres, the value of Grand Island in 1825 was set by the State at about \$48,423. It was sold at that time for \$76,230 to four men — Samuel Leggett, John B. Yates, Archibald McIntyre and Peter Smith.

Leggett purchased 2,500 acres on the east side of the Island at the request of Major Mordecai Manuel Noah, a New York politician, who proposed to establish here a city of refuge for the Jews and to call it "Ararat."



Ice house used in early logging industry.



Whitehaven settlement.

Confident his "city" would become a reality, Noah ordered a cornerstone to be constructed and spearheaded an elaborate program for its dedication on Grand Island. Transportation from the mainland created a problem and last minute plans changed the ceremony, September 2, 1825, from the Island to St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Buffalo. It was a lavish affair preceded by a parade down Main Street with bands and city officials in the line of march. But there was lack of enthusiasm on the part of the Jewish people and Ararat failed to materialize. Major Noah, a member of Tammany Hall, dejectedly returned to New York. The cornerstone he had so proudly envisioned as marking the site of a Jewish city was moved to many places before it finally became the property of the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, resting in the Grand Island Town Hall.

Grand Island's school system had its beginning about 1862, ten years after the Island became a township, when \$300 was raised by taxation "for the

support of the common schools." Nine years later there were ten school districts which, in 1879, were consolidated by an act of the Legislature. By 1887, eleven one-room school houses were in operation throughout the town. They continued in service until 1937 when Grand Island's first central school, Charlotte Sidway Elementary, opened with a total enrollment of about 100 students.

A second story was added to Sidway in 1947, and it was further expanded in 1950. Originally serving grades one through eight, the school established its first kindergarten classes in 1947. Grade nine was added in 1950 while students in grades ten through twelve continued to attend high schools in Buffalo, Kenmore and Tonawanda.

Increased population created the need to construct Kaegebein Elementary in 1952 and Huth Road Elementary in 1958. Both schools were enlarged shortly after construction. Grand Island High School was completed in 1963. Grand Island Middle School, ad-

jaacent to the high school, opened its doors in 1969.

Grand Island school history would not be complete without a mention of a building constructed in the Whitehaven Settlement in the 1830's to serve the little sawmill community as a church and a school. It can be assumed that the first school was continued in use even after the sawmill was dismantled. When John Nice, Grand Island's first supervisor, purchased the land in 1848, he played a large part in keeping the school house occupied; he was the father of 11 children, ten girls and a boy.

Once part of Niagara County, Grand Island was annexed to Erie County upon its creation in 1821. The Island was included in the Township of Tonawanda when that settlement was separated from the City of Buffalo in 1836. In 1852, Grand Island was pronounced a township by the Erie County Board of Supervisors, its territory to include Frog Island, now known as Motor Island, as well as Beaver and Buckhorn Islands. While still a part of Tonawanda, Grand Island saw what might



The McComb Hotel.

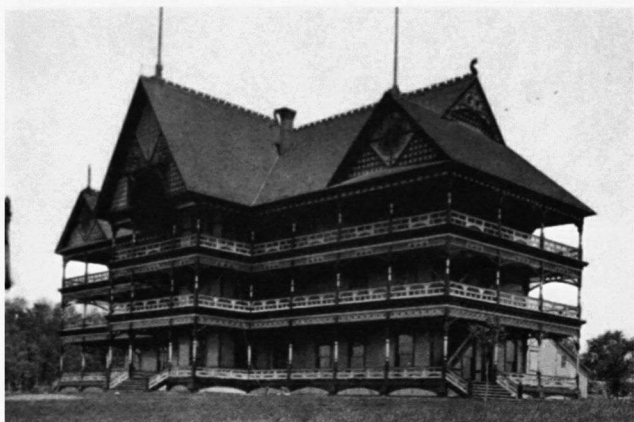
be considered its first commercial development — the saw mill town of Whitehaven on the east shore of the Niagara River.

The East Boston Company of Massachusetts in 1833 purchased 16,000 acres of Grand Island soil for about \$5.00 an acre and set about establishing the settlement and stripping the Island of its oak timber. Instead of being fashioned into barrel staves as it was during the squatter's regime, the lumber became part of some of the largest clipper ships built in America. But first it was processed in the saw mill at Whitehaven, a mill which boasted the largest steam saw in the world at that time. To serve its woodcutting population, Whitehaven Settlement also had a store, school and church.

Although mainly a farming community, Grand Island in its earlier days also was the site of exclusive clubs, elaborate estates and gay summer resorts. President Grover Cleveland was one of the organizers of the Beaver Island Club in 1852. The Falconwood Club in the same general vicinity, now Beaver Island State Park, came into being about 1858. The Oakfield Club and others



Falconwood Club House.



Oakfield Club.

also were well patronized by their mainland membership. Never to be forgotten were the Sidway and Spaulding estates.

Louis F. Allen's Allenton Farm is perhaps best remembered for having been visited by President Cleveland in his youth. Mr. Allen, the President's uncle, was a summer resident on his 500 acre farm at the south end of Grand Island. When offered for sale in 1887, the estate was advertised as producing upwards of 350 tons of quality hay each summer and contain-

ing "orchards of choice apples, pears, cherries and grapes" as well as "a broad vegetable garden of fertile soil."

River Lea, all that remains of the Allenton Farm, was built in 1873, by which time President Cleveland was well on his way in the political world, having been elected a Buffalo ward supervisor, appointed assistant district attorney, and, in 1870, elected Sheriff of Erie County. But his love for fishing and hunting as well as his affiliation with the Beaver Island Club no doubt continued to lure him to Grand Island when time permitted.

Before the turn of the century, Grand Island became the location of two large (for those days) hotels. In 1877, Ossian Bedell opened the first Bedell House in what is now Ferry Village. In 1887, that famous hostelry was followed by the equally well known McComb House on the west shore of the Niagara River.

The Bedell House register, now the property of a descendant of Ossian Bedell, testifies that guests at the Grand Island hotel came from all over the United States as well as Europe. Its proprietor, known as the "Duke of



River Lawn.

Grand Island" because of his importance in Grand Island and Erie County politics, was one of the first to promote building bridges to the mainland.

Badly damaged by fire, the Bedell House was rebuilt only to have fire again strike the then aging building on June 30, 1935. The blaze was fought by bucket brigades as well as mainland firemen. The South Grand Island bridge was the first opened to traffic that June day. The Sheridan Fire Company was allowed to bring its equipment over the span even though its formal opening and dedication was not scheduled until two weeks later.

The McComb House, like the original Bedell House, had its share of gingerbread trim. It was an imposing structure "with verandahs two hundred fifty feet in length and extending up four stories" to quote a newspaper story announcing its opening February 20, 1887. The West River hotel escaped "death" by flames. Instead demolition was its fate, and some of the lumber from it was used to build at least one home still in existence.

Recreation spots which dotted Grand Island's shoreline early in the century included Eagle Park, Sheenwater, Electric Beach, and Edgewater. Only the hotel at Edgewater on East River Road remains. The construction of West River Parkway by the State in 1950 erased all traces of Eagle Park and Sheenwater.

Only an occasional pile from a long vanished dock recalls the tragedy which struck Eagle Park June 23, 1912. Thirty-nine lives were lost when the dock there collapsed. The catastrophe happened at the end of a sunny Sunday as about 150 picnickers waited to board an incoming barge. The tug was the

Clarence Fix, the barge, the *Lottie Kerber*.

Grand Island made soft-pedaled history during the Prohibition era. Its ideal location — dry United States on one side and wet Canada on the other — made it an almost perfect place for the so-called rum-runners to hide their forbidden wares until an opportune time presented itself for delivery to thirsty Americans. There were no bridges to contend with and consequently no tolls gates with custom officers waiting to inspect and ask questions.

Prohibition is said to have been a profitable time for Island farmers who dared pick up liquid Canadian cargo dropped off on the west side of the Island, transport it across town and then, by ferry or private boat, deliver it to waiting customers along the Tonawanda shore.

Smuggling operations were accomplished in many ways. An alert customs agent sometimes found liquor under a load of hay brought to Buffalo via ferry. Island students attending high



Riverlea, now Grand Island Historical Society.



Grand Island and Navy Island at top, Ft. Erie, Ont. lower left joined to Buffalo by the Peace Bridge.

school in Buffalo or Tonawanda often unwittingly provided a coverup for bootleggers. Little did the youngsters know as they sat on boxes aboard the ferry that the hard seats covered with burlap often were cases of Canadian ale or whiskey.

Dry agents were known to have searched a Grand Island farm for such evidence but their thorough investigation of house, barns and fields failed to find any. They forgot to look down the farmer's well.

Then came the bridges, opened to the public in 1935. No longer was transportation to and from the mainland limited to boats. A hard, cold winter no longer meant the possibility of residents being stranded for days.

The completion of the giant spans meant the beginning of housing developments such as Sandy Beach at the north end of town in 1937, and Grandyle Village in 1942. World War II put a damper on home building for a while, but by 1950, developers were back in business, a Grand Island business that continues to expand every year.

It may be hard to imagine that a town, surrounded by water, as late as 1958 had a limited water supply. Wells were not uncommon. Water was delivered by truck to most inland areas. The clamor for better facilities became louder as building and population increased. More water districts were established and now they are island-

wide. Pumping operations were more than doubled and another source of water was contracted to meet growing needs. Water lines now are installed as development calls for them.

Official population figures best attest to what the building of the bridges accomplished in the way of growth. The census in 1930 was 626; in 1940 it increased to 1,055 and then on to 3,081 in 1950. By 1960 the official count was 9,607 and a special census five years later listed 10,774. Another special

count in 1966 showed a rise to 11,294. The latest official census conducted in 1970 revealed the Island then had 13,977 residents.

Grand Island covers a 17,381 acre area (27 square miles) including 23 miles of waterfront. Larger than the island of Manhattan, the town surrounded by the Niagara River can be proud of its history, perhaps not as explosive as that of other communities of equal size but certainly as colorful and exciting — and definitely unique.

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